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SUBJECT: PDP TO BOYCOTT CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL

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[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 851

Classified By: Charge Marc Desjardins for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In an internal meeting August 2, the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) decided to boycott the presentation of its candidate for the October presidential elections to the Constitutional Council as required by the electoral calendar. The PDP still intends to have party president Nejib Chebbi run in the October presidential elections, despite the prohibition contained in the March 2008 Amendment to the electoral law. The party will focus primarily on the legislative elections. It has 26 candidates with backups should the GOT reject any of them. The PDP is also working on a brochure for public distribution highlighting sectors in need of pressing reform. These brochures will be presented as a governance alternative to the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally's (RCD) policies. Khechana stated that the recent closing of their Gafsa office on August 3 was based on financial constraints and local leaders calling for PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi to present her candidacy instead of Chebbi. The party has been facing internal difficulties maintaining unity in the face of the repressive political climate. End summary.

PDP's Stance on Elections

[1](#)2. (C) In a meeting held August 2 to decide electoral strategy, the PDP, one of the few true opposition parties, elected to boycott the presentation of their candidate for the October 2009 presidential elections to the Constitutional Council. Presentation of presidential candidates to the Constitutional Council by all registered parties is required between August 26 and September 24. Rachid Khechana, member of the PDP political bureau and editor-in-chief of the weekly opposition newspaper Al-Mawkef, told PolOff August 5 that the PDP publicly presenting its candidate to the Constitutional Council would be tantamount to accepting the legality of the March 2008 amendment to the electoral law that made PDP Secretary General Maya Jribi the party's only possible legal candidate.

[1](#)3. (C) Khechana said the amendment to the electoral law was tailored to rid the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) of any credible opposition by limiting the choices of opposition parties. The PDP will continue denouncing the electoral law and call for domestic and international support for the institution of open, fair and transparent electoral legislation. Khechana clarified that boycotting the presentation of their presidential candidate did not mean the

PDP had no candidate for the presidential election. The party's former Secretary General, Nejib Chebbi, will be the candidate. The decision will demonstrate the party's public denunciation of the electoral climate in Tunisia since "everyone" knows the elections results are pre-determined and President Ben Ali is slated to remain in office.

¶4. (C) Khechana said that the party will not boycott the presentation of its candidates for the legislative elections.

The electoral calendar requires all parties to publicly present their legislative candidates to the Constitutional Council between September 20 and September 26. The PDP is prepared for the legislative elections and will present the names of 26 candidates in timely fashion to represent the 26 governorates where elections will be contested. (Note: Although Tunisia is divided into 24 governorates, the governorates of Tunis and Sfax are in turn divided into two constituencies). Anticipating that the GOT will reject several of their legislative candidates, the PDP has also prepared a list of backups.

PDP's "New Deal" for Tunisia

¶5. (C) Khechana claimed that the party has a clear vision for Tunisia. He stated that the PDP was currently translating a booklet from Arabic to French of the party's vision for Tunisia, highlighting the sectors where reform is crucial and indispensable to Tunisia's development. The PDP believes these essential reforms include:

-- Political reform: The PDP is creating a draft constitution. According to Khechana, the current constitution grants President Ben Ali and any subsequent president too much power and there is a pressing need for decentralization even for basic official daily administration. The proposed new constitution would promote a parliamentary regime based on pluralism. There would also be an amendment of the legal code to reinforce the protection of liberties and human rights.

-- Economic and social reform: To curb unemployment, the PDP would increase domestic and foreign direct investment by eliminating internal impediments caused by corruption and the first family's control over the economy. Agriculture and industry would be promoted to restore investor confidence. The PDP would also ameliorate openness with its North African neighbors through improved bilateral relations with Libya and Algeria. These measures, according to Khechana, would inevitably improve the domestic job market and stop the Tunisian youth exodus which he described as a national crisis.

-- Educational reform: Khechana claimed this was the most contentious area currently in Tunisia. He stated that the GOT's elimination of a liberal arts curriculum at the university level, from 2000, and focusing on practical education to facilitate transition to the job market has destabilized Tunisia's long history of good education. The PDP would reform this system by reinstituting a diverse educational system that conforms to domestic needs and international competitiveness. The PDP hopes to achieve this in open collaboration with students and educators.

-- Cultural and ideological reform: The PDP wants to promote political reconciliation with Tunisia's political and cultural history. Tunisians and the GOT need to remember the role Islam played in the country's cultural history, and the GOT's infringement on the free practice of Islam needs to be curbed. There needs to be recognition by the GOT of moderate Islam and Khechana claimed by doing this, a PDP led GOT would stabilize the threat of Salafism, an active issue in Tunisia.

-- International relations: The PDP believes Tunisia plays an important role in the Mediterranean, a role comparable to Belgium's in the EU. A modernized Tunisian political structure would enable Tunisia to serve as a link between the

EU and North Africa. Khechana claimed the idea of a Mediterranean Union was not feasible because it encompassed too many countries and the unresolved issues with Israel remained an impediment. He stated that the interest in a Mediterranean Union should be developed bilaterally at this stage of North Africa's development. As for the Arab Maghreb Union, Khechana said issues with Western Sahara and the division of power under the current charter made the idea unfeasible. He said that the PDP supported Morocco and not Algeria on the issue of Western Sahara.

Getting the PDP Message Heard

¶16. (C) Khechana said that the PDP was continuing to use the international media, internet and its local paper to get the PDP message heard. Given the censorship and monopoly of the local media by the GOT, Khechana stated that the PDP concentrated on diffusing their message via Arabic and foreign satellite stations. He believed that Tunisians actually paid more attention to these stations than to local stations.

¶17. (C) He also said that the PDP, contrary to other opposition political parties, was well represented within Tunisia with more local branches. He claimed the PDP had 14 local offices within the country and from these offices, PDP news filtered to the public in the rural areas. In addition to the foreign satellite media, Khechana claimed that the PDP's political message was effectively transmitted via its weekly opposition paper Al-Mawkef. PDP Secretary General, Maya Jribi says that the PDP is strongest in the south, and weakest in the northwest area of Le Kef and Beja. She added that the PDP has a surprisingly strong branch in the RCD stronghold of Sfax.

PDP Office in Gafsa Closed August 3

¶18. (C) Local media reported August 3 that the PDP closed its regional office in Gafsa based on disagreements between PDP Gafsa leaders and the PDP leadership. The PDP Gafsa leadership reportedly wrote articles critical of the PDP. Khechana explained that the office in Gafsa was closed primarily due to overdue rents the party could not afford. He admitted to a disagreement between Gafsa and party leaders. He said, as was also reported in the press, that the Gafsa leadership continued, contrary to party instructions, to focus on presenting Maya Jribi instead of Nejib Chebbi as the party's presidential candidate.

¶19. (C) Khechana claimed it was mainly two individuals in the Gafsa office who were strong proponents of this idea, Ali Ammar and Abdel Razzak Daii. These two individuals, according to Khechana, defended publicly the idea that Jribi should run for president and advocated for her candidacy on the internet. Khechana believed that the GOT was behind the incident, exercising financial pressure since the Gafsa office owed rent arrears and members were personally liable for the debts. The Gafsa members faced increasing pressure to vacate the premises due to the arrears. The PDP decided to close the office August 3 and "summoned" both Ammar and Daii to Tunis.

Comment

¶10. (C) Mounting a challenge against the RCD in the repressive local climate is increasing tension within the PDP. Already sure of a Ben Ali victory in the Presidential elections, the PDP remains focused on winning some seats in the legislative elections. They do not want a similar result as in 2004, when the party did not run at all. With severe media restriction, and economic and political pressure inflicted on private citizens to discourage sympathy for the

opposition, getting the message out and increasing support for the PDP does not appear to be working. There remains the continued issue of whether Maya Jribi should run. Regardless of allegations of RCD influence, certain PDP factions favor her candidacy. Not presenting a presidential candidate who conforms to the law may play right into the hands of the RCD since the PDP would not have a recognized presidential candidate at all. It seems before the PDP can provide a vision for Tunisia, it needs to have a united front within the party. End comment.
DESJARDINS